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The Balancing Act of Action and Learning: A Systematic Review of the Action Learning Literature

Yonjoo CHO
Texas A&M University
USA

Despite considerable commitment to the application of action learning as an organization development intervention, no identified systematic investigation of action learning practices has been reported. Based on a systematic literature review, the purpose of this paper is to identify whether researchers strike a balance between action and learning in their studies of action learning. Research findings in this study included: (1) only 32 empirical studies were found from the electronic database search; (2) based on the hypothesized continuum of Revans' original proposition of balancing action and learning, the author categorized 32 studies into three groups: action-oriented, learning-oriented, and balanced action learning; (3) there were only nine studies on balanced action learning among 32 empirical studies, whose insights included an effective use of project teams, applications of action learning for organization development, and key success factors such as time, reflection, and management support; (4) case study was among the most frequently used research method and only six quality studies met key methodological traits; and (5) therefore, more rigorous empirical research employing quantitative methods as well as case studies is needed to determine whether researchers strike a balance between action and learning in studies on action learning.

Keywords : Action Learning, Systematic Literature Review, The Matrix Method

Texas A&M University
yonjoo.cho@gmail.com

Introduction

Today's organizations require continued learning for change to stay competitive and sustain growth. Although discussions about learning organizations are abundant, many organizations appear to know little about how to learn. Action learning is a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organization (Marquardt, 2004). Action learning has been implemented as tools for organization development as well as leadership development in numerous organizations in many countries (Bosyhk, 2000; Mitchell & Miller, 2004; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007; Pedler, 1991).

While action learning practices are still growing in many fields and locations, research interest in action learning has fluctuated from high to moderate. Some authors have suggested that the peak of research interest in action learning was during the late 1990s. A number of special editions were published, first, at *The Journal of Management Development* in 1987, and others followed: *Education + Training* in 1996, *Journal of Workplace Learning* in 1996 and 2000, two issues from *Performance Improvement Quarterly* in 1998, *Advances in Human Resource Development* in 1999, *Management Learning* in 2001 (titled project-based learning) and *The Learning Organization* in 2002. These special editions have rekindled interests in action learning in terms of what it is about (definitions and concepts) and what we should know (cases and lessons).

Research Problem

Despite considerable commitment to the application of action learning as an organization development intervention, no identified systematic investigation of action learning practices has been reported. Based on a systematic literature review, the purpose of this study is to identify whether researchers strike a balance between action and learning in their studies of action learning.

Action learning is most effective when directly related to work applications or to action (Revans, 1971, 1998). In this study, action means deliberate problem-solving that is required for solutions or outcomes, whereas learning means personal, team, or organizational learning that are to be acquired as a result of action. Related literature suggests that action learning programs should carefully be implemented to ensure the balancing act of action and learning (Kuhn & Marsick, 2005; Learmonth & Pedler, 2004; McLoughlin, 2004; O'Hara, Bourner, & Webber, 2004; Pedler, 2002). It has been, however, the author's observation as facilitator of action learning programs that, although action learning is implemented with the intention of supporting organization development, they are often unbalanced or asymmetrical, tipping in favor of either action or learning. A reason for this difference in focus may be that some action learning programs are implemented by HR departments, whereas other programs are situated within organizational operations. This paper outlines the process and outcome for a systematic review of available action learning literature with attention to issues associated with action and learning symmetry or asymmetry within the literature reviewed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Revans' original proposition, "no learning without action and no action without learning" (1998, p. 83). In his theory of action learning, Revans designated the inseparable unity of doing and knowing via three interacting systems that are best understood as a whole: systems alpha, system beta, and system gamma (Coghlan & Pedler, 2006). System alpha focuses on the investigation of the problem versus system beta on its resolution and system gamma on the learning of the participants. The purpose of action learning is to learn through devising solutions and strategies in response to problems and implementing them through deliberative action (Ashton, 2006). Although seemingly

apparent, Revans emphasized the importance of carefully considering each of the two elements—action learning is about integrating work and learning (Maltiba & Marsick, 2008). A common aspect regarding action learning is that it is often subjective about personal learning, while simultaneously objective about the problem and its context (Willis, 2004). Through balanced process of action and learning, people often develop skills associated with how to better learn from their experience (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007). As a result, profound personal development is realized from reflection upon action (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Brook, 2005). The overriding value of Revans' balanced action learning, therefore, is believed to be a pragmatic focus on learning for more effective instrumental action (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999).

In spite of many different interpretations since Revans' original proposition of balanced action learning, there seems to be two consistent themes that stand out: work-based real issues and team learning. Day (2000), for instance, envisioned that state-of-the-art leadership development occurred within the context of work initiatives that are tied to business imperatives. In his study, action learning was identified as one of the key practices for the future. Senge (1990) suggested that teams are the fundamental learning unit in an organization. Project teams are defined as teams of people, drawn from within or outside the organization to undertake specific projects (Keegan & Turner, 2001). Project-based learning refers to the theory and practice of utilizing real-world work assignments on time-limited projects to achieve performance and to facilitate individual and collective learning (DeFillippi, 2001). The use of projects for both learning and task achievement in project-based learning is most typically associated with action learning. Work-based learning is another approach to making learning arise from the work itself (Raelin, 2008). The closest parallel to work-based learning is action learning. The action in action learning, however, seems to be there as the pathway to learning. The imbalance of action and learning in action learning can be overcome by work-based learning's reflective practices. Reflection is essential to learning in order to convert tacit experience into explicit knowledge (Raelin, 2001).

Using Revans' original proposition of balanced action learning as a theoretical framework in this study, a systematic review of action learning literature was undertaken to identify the current status of research concerning action and learning symmetry or asymmetry and to envision future trends. This effort for foreseeing research trend will contribute to organizations' better use of action learning practices for organization development as well as leadership development in rapid changing environments.

Research Questions and Method

A central focus of this study was to explore the hypothesized imbalance and determine whether action learning researchers strike a balance between action and learning in action learning literature. Questions guiding this inquiry are:

- Which of the constructs, action or learning, has been emphasized in studies of action learning?
- Based on study findings, what trends lay ahead for research on action learning?

Search Process

In this study, the review of the literature covered a 6-year period from 2000 to 2005. The search included use of the electronic database, *Business Source Complete*, with special attention to the leading academic journal in this area, *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. The "action learning" was the keyword typed in the advanced search process. Choices for advanced search were: full text, published from 2000 to 2005, references available, articles, and peer-reviewed scholarly journals only. In so doing, a total of 283 articles were collected.

Selection Criteria

Previous reviews of action learning literature included books and/or articles published before 2000 including: Mumford (1985, 1994) and Smith & O'Neil (2003a, 2003b). These reviews highlighted action learning studies over the previous decades. Common categories they used include action learning fundamentals, practice, and focus. However, there are two issues involved: there was no theoretical or conceptual framework used for review and their selection criteria were not identified and "subjective" (Smith & O'Neil, 2003b, p. 154).

For inclusion in this review, articles had to be: (1) published in peer-reviewed journals; (2) published between 2000 and 2005; and (3) empirical studies that either involved human subjects or reported research findings. Among the total of 283 articles, studies were excluded if they were simply summaries, editorials, reflective and conceptual papers. Only 32 (11.3%) empirical studies met these selection criteria.

Abstraction and Synthesis: The Matrix Method

A systematic literature review of studies on action learning was undertaken, using Garrard's (2007) *Matrix Method*. The Matrix Method is both a structure and a process for systematically reviewing the literature. The Review Matrix Table, a place to record notes about each article using columns and rows, provides a standard structure for creating order (see Table 1). Using the Matrix Method, each of the 32 empirical studies was evaluated in ascending chronological order using a structured abstracting form with 10 topics: reference number, lead author's name, publication year, study type, study purpose, theoretical framework, subjects, study design, analytic methods, and study findings.

The synthesis in the Matrix Method is a critical analysis and review process of the literature on a specific topic. While synthesizing the review process, using the hypothesized logical continuum of Revans' balanced action learning, the authors

marked on each study to categorize: action-oriented [A], learning-oriented [L] or balanced [A/L] (see Figure 1). Each empirical study was carefully analyzed and located in one of three categories. Action-oriented studies were selected when action learning programs had action at the center, were rooted in the real business concerns or encouraged managers to collaborate on real workplace issues. Learning-oriented studies were chosen when the core of action learning programs lied in learning rather than solving the problem or was applied chiefly for personal learning and not so much for organizational problems. Balanced action learning studies were marked when the study's author(s) tried to strike a balance between action and learning. In these studies, often reflective practices and organizational learning are discussed to pay attention to learning and see beyond the task at hand. When their focus was clearly laid out, it was easy to determine whether each study was either action- or learning-oriented or balanced. In case of the study's not being self-explanatory, the author read each study back and forth until she finds emphasis on each construct, action or learning, or balanced.

Additionally, the quality of each study was examined for key methodological traits: theory use, reporting of subjects, study design, analytic methods, and the precise description of these traits in the study. This assessment was reported as a way to see the overall quality of action learning research.

Research Findings

The process of abstraction and synthesis led to the identification of action and learning balance of each study. The Review Matrix Table shows the outcome, as shown in Table 1. Also found was the mark of either [A] or [L] or [A/L] on each study in the table, indicating whether the study was action-oriented or learning-oriented or balanced. When describing studies below they are often referred to by number between [ ] as they appear on Table 1.

Table 1. The Review Matrix for Research Literature on Action Learning from 2000 to 2005

Ref. #	Lead Author	Pub. Year	Study Type	Purpose	Theoretical Framework	Subjects	Study Design	Analytic Methods	Findings [Action versus Learning]
1	Day	2000	Literature Review	To examine the field of leadership development	Leader dev. and leadership dev.	Research for the past 5 to 10 years	Literature review	Conceptual analysis	Reviewed practices: 360-feedback, executive coaching, mentoring, networking, job assignments, and *AL*.
2	Ingram	2000	Case Study	To reflect on lessons learned from mgt. program	Action learning	15 training staff in Marriott, UK	Participant observation	Summative evaluation	The summative evaluation includes hard and soft areas: interface, admin., communication, and resources. [A]
3	Robinson	2001	Case Study	To test AL as a pedagogical approach in a Diploma in UK	Revans' AL principles	17 students	Interviews and a questionnaire	Ethnographic data analysis	The Diploma in Religious Ed. can be seen as a valid AL. [L]
4	Keegan	2001	Qualitative Study	To explore project-based learning in 19 firms in EU	Organizational learning	44 managers in 19 firms	Interviews	Inductive methods	Quantity does not equal quality: learning is prohibited on projects. [A/L]
5	Ayas	2001	Case Study	To explore PBL for reflective practitioners	Reflective practices	Project teams (Ford and Fokker)	A review questionnaire	Performance review	Building reflective practitioners is a way to diffuse learning and projects serve for developing learning. [A/L]
6	Arthur	2001	Case Study	To illustrate a typology of learning outcomes for firms	A model of PBL	Four US project-sponsoring firms	Case report	Typology analysis	The project is a learning episode for both participants and the company. [A/L]
7	Coughlan	2001	Case Study	To show continuous improvement using NALP	National Action Learning Program	Firm A in Ireland	Semi-structured interviews	NA	The firm developed a capability to improve their operations in NALP. [A]
8	Coughlan	2002	Case Study	To describe NALP in Ireland	NALP	Managers in three case firms	Case report	Case study analysis	All approaches used were firmly rooted in the real *business* concerns, and not on general development. [A]
9	Edmonson	2002	Exploratory Study	To explore collective learning process (reflection and action)	A group-level ("meso") approach	12 OL teams in the US company	Observation, interviews	Analysis of qualitative data	A group-level approach provides insights into how OL hinders effective change against external pressures. [A/L]
10	Davey	2002	Case Study	To investigate AL in promoting innovation	Revans' L=P+Q	Six managers in a SME, UK	Observation, interviews	Content analysis	Feedback suggests that AL can create cultural change in the construction industry, esp. SMEs. [A]
11	Pedler	2002	Case Study	To address how local knowledge can be improved	Org. knowledge creation	Neighborhood facilitators in UK	Observation, questionnaire	Reflection	AL can develop local knowledge by forming relationships across the middle ground. [A/L]
12	Hudspith	2002	Case Study	To illustrate how AL was used for MD in a restaurant	Hospitality service	50 general managers in UK	Participant observation	Reflection	AL in a corporate university can provide focused people development potential. [A]
13	Miller	2003	Case Study	To detail a case study of AL for workplace learning	Garvin's three stages for LO	35 managers in a hospital, Australia	Surveys of all staff	Kirkpatrick's evaluation	Workplace learning interventions through AL encourage managers to collaborate on real workplace issues. [A]
14	Harker	2003	Case Study	To illustrate a case study of AL in e-marketing in UK	AL for marketing education	Six group projects in a University	Curriculum design	Assessment of ind./group work	AL offers high levels of student involvement, skill acquisition, and university/community co-operation. [A]
15, 16	Smith	2003	Literature Review 1, 2	To review 110 articles of AL covered from 1994 to 2000	Mumford's categories	110 journal articles	Literature review	Content analysis	A substantial number of articles on management and executive development.

17	Waddil l	2003	Literature Review	To examine how AL involves adult learning theories	Action learning and adult learning	Articles published from 1986 to 2003	Literature review	Conceptual analysis	Six components of AL incorporate five adult learning orientations.
18	Marqua rdt	2004	Literature Review	(the same as above)	(the same as above)	Articles published from 1986 to 2004	Literature review	Conceptual analysis	A case of large energy company was used for each component.
19	Willis	2004	Case studies	To evaluate 10 cases of AL using the Revans' theory	Revans' theory of self-organizing	10 case histories of AL in the US	Marker method of estimating	Textual analysis	The inspection of 10 cases does not deliver strong evidence that Revans' theory-intact is being practiced.
20	Donne nberg	2004	Case Study	To explore how ALs foster OD in The Netherlands	Cognitive systems approach	Two cases	Participant observation	Case analysis	AL seems to be applied chiefly for individual development and not so much for OD. [L]
21	Coughl an	2004	Case Study	To explore how AL was used in NALP and CO-IMPROVE	Action learning	Inter-organization settings in EU countries	Participant observation	Reflection	Implementing AL in inter-organizational settings requires sensitive adaptation to accommodate differences. [A]
22	Davey	2004	Case Study	To evaluate AL for innovation in construction	Action learning	Construction professionals	Observations, interviews	Content analysis	AL is unsuited for creative learning across the construction industry. [A]
23	Rigg	2004	Case Study	To reflect on critical AL in MD program (MSc) in UK	Critical action learning	Four cases	Participant observation	Text analysis	Critical AL engages participants in critical perspectives to make connections between their learning and work. [L]
24	Learmo nth	2004	Case Study	To illustrate Auto AL for building capacity	Auto AL	A manager in a health agency, UK	AL problem brief	Comparative analysis	Features of Auto AL: dialogue b/w manager and mentor, relationships, *lone* workers, AL problem brief. [A/L]
25	McLou ghlin	2004	Case Study	To illustrate AL in marketing for a MSc degree in Ireland	Revans' balanced action learning	Marketing Dev. Program	Curriculum design	Reflection	For students there can be no learning without action and for educators all action drives further learning. [A/L]
26	O'Hara	2004	Case Study	To describe Self-Managed AL applied on MD in Ireland	Action learning	380 managers in a Health Board	Observation and interviews	Reflection	SMAL enabled managers to facilitate their AL sets and developed the skills of facilitative management. [A/L]
27	Hoban	2004	Case Study	To illustrate AL for science teachers in a high school	AL principles	3 science teachers in Australia	Interviews with students/teacher	Theme analysis	The students' feedback was a catalyst for teachers' reflection. [L]
28	Pedler	2005	Exploratory Study	To summarize the study findings of AL in 2004, UK	Revans' classical principles	24 academics and 172 practitioners	Interviews and survey	frequency analysis	AL was used for personal development; not widely used in bus schools; its growth in UK was inconclusive. [L]
29	Kuhn	2005	Case Study	To illustrate AL for strategic innovation in a US company	Six cognitive dimensions	Four teams in the global program	Participant observation	Reflection	AL can be used to develop individual and collective capabilities for strategic innovation. [A/L]
30	Boulde n	2005	Case Study	To illustrate AL for leadership program	Peer group learning	49 managers in UK and USA	Observation, questionnaire	Frequency analysis	AL was used to enhance the effectiveness of Insights (leadership program. [A]
31	Faull	2005	Case Study	To illustrate AL for OD in a hospital's rehabilitation team	Action learning	A hospital's pain management team	Observation and interviews	Reflection	AL was used to facilitate innovative change of the interdisciplinary rehabilitation' culture. [A]
32	Penney	2005	Case Study	To reflect on AL for pre-service teachers in Australia	AR and AL for critical reflection	A final year undergraduate unit	Participant observation	Reflective analysis	AL was used for critical reflection on the unit developed for pre-service teachers' professional development. [L]

(*Note*. The Matrix Table was formatted to fit in this paper. AL: action learning; PBL: project-based learning; NALP: national action learning program; MD: management development; OD: organization development; CO-IMPROVE: EU-funded project of action learning in the inter-organizational learning network; A: action-oriented; L: learning-oriented; A/L: balanced action learning)

Overall Characteristics

Thirty-two empirical studies published in 17 different peer-reviewed journals represented varied interest areas and study locations. Major journals included *Action Learning: Research and Practice* (11), *Management Learning* (4), and *Journal of Workplace Learning* (3). Various research areas covered management, education, leadership, engineering, marketing, health policy and hospitality management as well as HRD and OD. Study locations covered many countries: 11 studies in UK [2, 3, 10, 11, 12, 14, 22, 23, 24, 28, 30], six in US [5, 6, 9, 19, 29, 30], four in Ireland [7, 8, 25, 26], three in Australia [13, 27, 32], two in The Netherlands [5, 20] and Europe [4, 21], and one in New Zealand [31]. Action learning was more practiced and researched in UK and in Europe, particularly in public sectors, than those of the US. This may have to do with Revans' influence on action learning practices in Europe.

A research finding of the previous literature review from 1994 to 2000 (Smith & O'Neil, 2003a, 2003b) was that a substantial number of articles identified the use of action learning on management and executive development. This was confirmed in this study locating eight articles [1, 2, 12, 13, 25, 26, 30, 32]. The most frequent use of action learning (14 articles), however, was done for organization development [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 20, 21, 22, 24, 29, 31]. It can be considered a progress in terms of using action learning from individual development to broader contexts.

The corporate setting was the most practiced field (15) including various company types. Other settings included: six studies for education [3, 14, 23, 25, 27, 32] and three for public sectors [11, 24, 26] such as local government. Five project teams [4, 5, 6, 9, 29] were in-housed, while four cases were action learning groups of different companies and countries [8, 9, 21, 22]. Others included hotel [2], restaurant [12], and hospital [13, 31].

Findings: Balanced Action Learning

Figure 1 represents the hypothesized continuum of Revans' balanced action

learning in the action learning literature. Only nine studies (28%) were found in the balanced action learning category [4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 24, 25, 26, 29] versus more studies (11) in the action category [2, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 21, 22, 30, 31] than six in the learning category [3, 20, 23, 27, 28, 32].

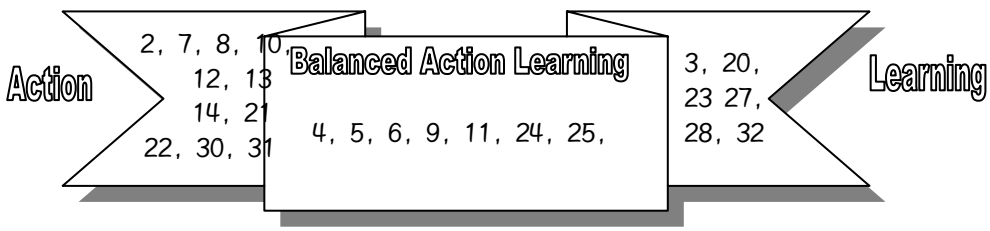

Figure 1. The Hypothesized Continuum of Revans' Balanced Action Learning in the Action Learning Literature

Imbalance of Action and Learning

Three studies were chosen to show a lack of balanced action learning [28, 20, 19]. Pedler, et al. [28] conducted a survey study of action learning in UK through interviews with 24 experts and a survey of 172 practitioners. In spite of its limited sampling with few replies from large companies, they found that action learning has become more focused on personal development and less centered on organizational problems. The shift to individual choice of problems and away from negotiated agreements with the sponsors indicated that the chosen tasks were "own job" issues relatively isolated from the wider organizational context.

The lack of balanced use of action learning was also confirmed in the case study of The Netherlands [20]. By focusing only on action learning programs with willing members and organizations, the authors reasoned that organizational dynamics were ignored and no connection between what has been learned by participants and other members was secured. Another conclusion was that action learning failed to provide multiple learning experiences necessary to develop complex knowledge (Conger & Toegel, 2003).

Willis [19] explored whether10 case histories of US companies were properly

applying Revans' action learning theory. The applications of 10 cases tended to be partial, hierarchical, leader controlled, thus, countered to the Revans' principle of self-organizing capacity. The author called for reexamination about using action learning for management development in the US.

Balanced Action Leaning

Only nine studies among 32 empirical studies were categorized as the balanced action learning [4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 24, 25, 26, 29]. The studies of balanced action learning provided useful insights concerning: an effective use of project teams, the applications of action learning for organization development, and key success factors such as time, reflection, and management support.

Four studies of project teams showed the importance of practicing balanced action learning in corporate settings. First, the qualitative study of project-based learning (or action learning) in 19 European companies presented that learning was prohibited on projects [4]. Reasons included time pressures, a lack of decentralization, and the deferral of learning over emerging, localized learning practices. Second, the case study of two project teams of new product development showed that project-based learning was instrumental in building reflective practitioners [5]. Cultivating habits of reflective practice in the fast-paced project environment required deliberate attention to learning and seeing beyond the task at hand. Third, the case study of four companies in the US illustrated a range of (2 by 2) outcomes for project-based performance and learning [6]. The ideal project can be envisioned to combine both high performance and high learning outcomes for the company. In this study, the importance of the person as a contributor to project-based learning showed the balancing act of action and learning. Fourth, the case study of learning processes in 12 teams in the manufacturing company (engaged in activities ranging from strategic planning to manufacturing of products) presented why not all teams succeeded [9]. If teams were busy, reflective discussion in teams did not occur. Group discussion can be ineffective, while teams may have reflected but failed to implement changes.

Four case studies of the use of action learning in public sectors in UK and Ireland also presented balanced action learning practices. First, the case study of the local government in UK showed that action learning enabled the development of neighborhood facilitators who then established a relationship with their organizational leadership [11]. This relationship formed what has been called "a middle ground framework" (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and created both a learning space alongside the normal organizational order. Second, the auto action learning was a tool for policy change building capacity across the developing regional system to improve health in UK [24]. The auto action learning used the framework for reflection and tracking change, with input from a mentor. This person-centered nature was an important tool in supporting change agents to implement a policy change for health development. Third, the self-managed action learning was applied in a number of management development programs for a Health Board in Ireland [26]. By replacing set facilitator into set manager, the self-managed action learning enabled managers to facilitate their own sets and in doing so, they developed the skills of facilitative management. This innovative practice aimed to avoid pitfalls in action learning sets of being entirely task-focused or the other way. Fourth, the marketing development program at a business school in Ireland used action learning as the central pedagogy [25]. This program demonstrated that for students there was no learning without action and for educators all action drove further learning.

Lastly, the case study of the Chubb Global Executive Program in the US used an action learning model that catalyzed strategic innovation in mature organizations [29]. Central to this model was cognitive capabilities that engendered strategic, conceptual and generative thinking. Action learning was used to develop both individual and collective capabilities for strategic innovation, implying the dual mission: people development and business impact.

Key success factors of these nine balanced action learning studies included time for reflection, reflective practices, and management support. Four studies of project teams presented an effective (or ineffective) use of projects (or groups) for

organizational learning with the help of deliberate reflective practices and management support. Four case studies of action learning programs for public sectors in UK and Ireland also showed success when participants had sufficient time to reflect (for a relatively longer period) and management support.

Methodological Quality

Only six studies [4, 9, 10, 19, 20, 28] met the key methodological traits of quality research including theory use, reports of subjects, study design, analytic methods, and the precise description of these traits in the study. Six studies occupy less than 20% of the total 32 empirical studies and thus, the improvement of current research on action learning is necessary for the future.

Study Design

A majority of the action learning literature were case studies (24) versus five literature reviews [1, 15, 16, 17, 18] and three qualitative (or exploratory) studies [4, 9, 28]. Case studies employed methods including: participant observation as facilitator, in-depth interviews with participants and sponsors; and surveys of participants and organizational members. Numbers of subject were rather small, less than 50 participants, except for one case of more than 380 managers in 60 sets running over the five years. A majority of studies used qualitative analysis methods including: ethnographic data analysis; inductive method; typology, content, textual, comparative, theme, and conceptual analysis; and reflection. The Kirkpatrick's evaluation model was also used. Frequency analysis was the only quantitative analysis method.

Use of Theory

Half of the studies used Revans' action learning principles as a theoretical framework. Other theories included: organizational learning, reflective practices, project-based learning, a group-level approach to organizational learning,

organizational knowledge creation, adult learning, a cognitive systems approach, critical action learning, auto action learning, and cognitive dimensions of strategic innovation.

Discussion: Reflective Practices

In this study, key success factors of balanced action learning practices included time for reflection, reflective practices, and management support. The study findings indicated that supporting organizational factors should be ensured for success of action learning programs. Only with these organizational factors present, balanced action learning can be instrumental both for people development and for business impact.

Reflection is fundamental to learning and it provides a basis for future action (Raelin, 2001). Reflection is the process of stepping back from experience to process what the experience means, with a view to planning further action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005, p. 35). Moreover, critical reflection leads to transform participants' perspectives (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999). Organizations can fail to carry out essential adaptation due to incomplete reflection and action in teams situated at multiple levels in the organization's hierarchy (Edmonson, 2002).

The use of reflective learning can help participants to explore what they learned from the project experience and leave them better prepared for challenging projects in the future (Arthur et al., 2001). Reflective practices that help develop learning capabilities include the use of various organizational learning tools. Examples consider dialogue, story-telling (Ayas & Zeniuk, 2001), the use of metaphor (Edmonson, 2002; Keegan & Turner, 2001), team building (Ayas & Zeniuk, 2001), public reflection (Raelin, 2001, 2008), team reflection (Edmonson, 2002), and action learning conversations (Maltiba & Marsick, 2007). For instance, the metaphor used in a top management team protected the speaker from being direct and from the

potential social costs of raising a point of view that others might reject (Edmonson, 2002). The quality of team reflection was enhanced by proactively seeking relevant data, through talking with customers and others in the organization (Edmonson, 2002). Action learning conversations is a protocol for conducting structured conversations that can be used in leadership development programs or work opportunities that call for learning-in-action (Maltbia & Marsick, 2008). This protocol can be used to slow down action and enable managers to see how reflection could improve their thinking and the solutions to challenges.

Another example, IMPM (International Masters in Practicing Management), is a degree program in an international context that focuses on the development of managers and know-how transfer to the organizations (Mintzberg, 2004). This reflective learning is similar to action learning but more focused on reflection than on action, whereas action learning is regarded not allowing enough time for managers to reflect on what they have learned during and after working with problems. IMPM is believed to encourage managers to stop working and get distanced from work to reflect on themselves and organizations while sharing their experiences with other managers in the program.

Time is such valued as a key resource that managers must have in order to develop reflective learning practices. Garvin (2008) presented three building blocks of learning organization: supportive learning environment, concrete learning processes, and leadership behavior. Supportive learning environments, in particular, allow time for a pause in the action and encourage thoughtful review of the organizational process. Companies may not provide the time for reflection to occur and thereby may bypass learning opportunity (Arthur et al., 2001). The design for action learning, then, must integrate adequate time for managers to engage in reflection as well as action and learning.

Conclusion

Findings of this systematic review of action learning literature included: (1) only 32 empirical studies were found from the total of 283 articles from the electronic database search; (2) based on the hypothesized continuum of Revans' original proposition of balanced action learning, the author positioned 32 studies into three categories: balanced action learning, action-oriented, and learning-oriented; (3) there were only nine balanced action learning studies among 32 studies, whose insights included an effective use of project teams, the applications of action learning for organization development, and key success factors such as time, reflection, and management support; (4) case study was among the most frequently used research method and only six quality studies met the key methodological traits; and (5) therefore, more rigorous research employing quantitative methods as well as case studies is needed to determine whether researchers strike a balance between action and learning in studies on action learning.

Future topics for research on action learning include social capital, learning transfer, and culture fit. Social capital is defined as the resource available to an organization through its internal and external relationships (Arthur, et al., 2001). Day (2000) suggested that designing action learning projects with the intention of developing trust among participants would likely enhance the relational and cognitive dimensions of social capital. Less researched topics such as diversity and participants' perspective in studies on action learning can be aligned with social capital. In order to see any potential of learning transfer from action learning, attention should be paid to transfer system. Baldwin and Ford (1988), for instance, provided a literature review of the transfer research examining the effects of training design, trainee, and work-environment factors on conditions of transfer. Holton III et al. (2000) expanded on the concept of learning transfer system and reported on the validation of an instrument to measure factors in the system affecting transfer of learning. That learning transfer can be facilitated through critical reflection (Yorks, 2003) has been around for a while but how to do so remains unsettled.

Culture fit is another topic in future action learning research. One of research findings in this study was that action learning program was more practiced in UK and in Europe than in the US, presumably due to Revans' influences. Action learning programs designed around individual projects are more likely to appear in UK (Marsick & O'Neil, 1999), which was identified in a recent survey of action learning practices (Pedler, 2005). In contrast, Raelin (2006) reasoned that the North American culture seems to value individualism although teamwork is preached, which is one reason why action learning practices are underdeveloped when compared with those in UK. Kim (2007) identified team process followed by organizational factors as the key success factor of action learning in Korea. Such cultural differences in action learning practices, therefore, needs to be addressed in future research on action learning.

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Yonjoo CHO
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Instructional Systems Technology, Indiana University-Bloomington. Interests: Action Learning as an Organization Development, HR in the IT Industry, Evaluation of e-Learning, Case Studies, Gender Issues in Workplaces
E-mail: yonjoo.cho@gmail.com